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Carl Naylor
University of South Carolina - Columbia, canaylor@mailbox.sc.edu

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THE DAY THE JON BOAT WENT UP THE MOUNTAIN

by Carl Naylor

The sun was hot and overbearing. The Wateree River was especially low as a result of a lingering summer drought. The work was exhilarating and exhausting. It was a day like any other day in the world of South-Carolina-style underwater archaeology — except of course for when the jon boat went up the mountain.

We were conducting a survey of the Wateree below Camden near what is known as the Mulberry Site. Located on a high bluff overlooking the river, the site was that of an old Indian village, suspected to be one that Hernando deSoto visited in the year 1540. We had spent several days in the small ravine just below the high bluff, knee deep in the cool waters of Big Pine Tree Creek, oohing and aahing every time someone came up with a large piece of burial urn or other form of Indian pottery. So far we had retrieved, all very scientifically mind you, several hundred pieces of pottery. The small mountain of pot sherds sitting on the make-shift table of our field station was destined to be transported back to SCIAA headquarters in Columbia where it would be separated and sorted, washed and labeled, as well as analyzed and categorized. In other words, they would become a small mountain of pot sherds sitting on the table in the Institute's wet lab.

This particular day we had decided to do a reconnaissance of the river bottom both up and down stream from the site, ostensively to determine the extent of artifact scatter resulting from the erosion of the site into the river, and for that we needed the jon boat. This meant trouble from the start. We had brought two engines for the jon boat, and you might figure this was wise planning, however, I remember a conversation that went something like this: "One of the engines doesn't work too good." "Which one?" "Dunno, can't remember." As it turned out neither engine worked too well. Each performed for a short time before its particular malfunction mysteriously shut it down. This meant yanking it off the stern and replacing it with its partner that had been slumped in the bottom of the boat and running that one until it shut off. And, when neither engine felt like functioning, we pushed and pulled the boat along in the shallow water.

It was almost like taking a break when we would bully the jon boat onto a sand bar and Joe Beatty and I would scoot along the sandy bottom of the deep areas of the river in scuba gear. Chester DePratter and Chris Amer would walk the exposed sand bars, and Chris's German shepherd Shane would bark at birds and every so often chase cows that had been trying to find shade in the tree line next to the river. When the water was too shallow to allow diving, Joe and I alternated between motoring the boat and changing the engines. By this time we had come up with fond names for the two engines. One was son-of-a-something and the other was mother-something, although which was which I don't remember and we probably didn't make any real distinction at the time.

When we came to the I-20 bridge, Joe and I decided to don our scuba gear and dive the deep areas under the bridge. You never know what those darn Indians might have thrown off bridges back in the sixteenth century. Poking around the base of a bridge abutment I came across a rather large stainless steel kitchen knife. I surfaced to find Joe examining a 9mm. semi-automatic pistol he had just found. We began conjuring up all sorts of horrible crimes that could have been committed with the two weapons: stabbings and mutilations committed by a person with a kitchen knife, shootings and assassinations committed by a person with a semi-automatic pistol, mass murders committed by a person with a kitchen knife and a semi-automatic pistol. This was all brought back to earth when someone pointed out that natives in 1540 committed very few mass murders, especially with kitchen knives and semi-automatic pistols.

Anyway, after changing engines, pushing and pulling the boat, and envisioning all sorts of horrible murders using a pistol and a kitchen knife, we were exhausted by the time we got back to the site. And we still faced the chore of getting the jon boat and all the equipment, including the two engines, up the steep bluff to our vehicles.

Now, about this bluff. Despite cavorting with a bunch of Spaniards wearing heavy metal armor during the middle of the summer, these Indians were no fools. They had picked this site for their village with great care. More like a small mountain, the top of the bluff stood a good 75 feet above the water and it was nearly straight down. Just getting up it meant pulling ourselves up a rope tied to a tree at the top. Taking equipment to the top meant a leapfrog-type maneuver, where you put the piece of equipment as far up in front of you as you could, then pulling yourself ahead of it with the rope, reach back for the piece of gear and again place it in front of you until you made it to the top. For days we had been hauling gear up and down this way. This included scuba gear, pumps, hose, screens, and all sorts of technical underwater archaeological gear designed to be functional as well as heavy and awkward. The jon boat presented a new problem . . . er, challenge.

We attacked this challenge with great vigor. We looked at all the logistics, considered all the circumstances, perused all the possibilities, and studied all the strategies. With knocking off for the day and going to dinner the next item on the agenda, I'd say we took all of five minutes. Then someone suggested putting all the equipment into the jon boat and pulling the jon boat up the bluff using the heavy duty winch on the front of the dive truck? Heads nodded. Tired muscles applauded. Joe went for the winch control.

Once the jon boat was loaded with all the gear, hooked up to the winch cable, and pointed in the right direction, everyone pulled themselves up the rope to the top of the hill. There was either a sense that the idea would work perfectly or that it would be better to be at the top of the bluff in case it didn't. Joe engaged the winch and slowly the jon boat and its contents crawled up the face of the bluff. Steadily it came, foot by foot, meter by meter, with hardly a groan from the winch motor. Just as the boat was nearing the top of the slope, and we were patting ourselves on the back for having come up with such a great idea, we heard the ominous sound of

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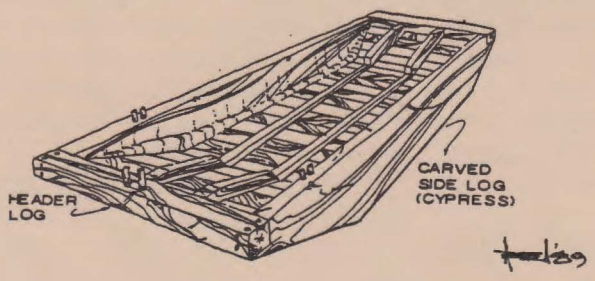
the winch taking a serious strain, and then what sounded like four or five shots from a .22-cal. rifle.

Looking over the edge of the bluff we saw immediately what had happened. When the boat reached just below the top of the slope the angle of the winch cable changed from almost straight up to more sideways toward the winch. Since the jon boat couldn't change with it, the bow of the boat simply dug into the side of the bluff. The strain popped four or five of the rivets holding the flat bow of the boat to its front platform, pulling the bow out a good bit. Instead of the square bow the boat now had a sizable vee bow.

After hauling the equipment out the boat we finally got it over the edge of the bluff and onto its trailer, although with its newly-configured bow it doesn't sit quite right on its trailer anymore. We're often asked about the change in the jon boat, and we usually respond with a version of the "special archaeological modification" story. And that works quite well, too, except for the time when Joe had to go the boat registration place and explain why we now have a 15 ft. jon boat instead of a 14 ft. jon boat.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Joe subsequently turned the pistol over to the State Law Enforcement Division (SLED), and the bow of the jon boat has been put back somewhat to its original state, although the dock Joe collided with looks a little worse for wear. Shane was last seen chasing birds (and Chris) in a Columbia park. Chester DePratter has been spotted walking the halls of the Institute wearing a big button that says, "Hernando Who?" Carl Naylor is known to be hiding out somewhere in Charleston.

—— This report cleared by SCIAA censors ———



CAROLINA WATERCRAFT

by Mark M. Newell

The barge is one of the least glamorous of our local boats - yet is probably the oldest type of European craft to be built here and the most widely used.

The first barges to be used here were almost certainly those adapted for use as ferries. The earliest roads in the Colony were those in the coastal lowlands where rivers had to be crossed every few miles. We have accounts of barge construction for ferries dating back to 1754. I'll talk about ferry craft in the next column.

Doubtless barges also began to be used to float cargoes on tides from early plantations close to Georgetown and Charleston - but we have yet to see archival evidence of this.

Extensive barge-building probably began during the rise of the tidally irrigated rice plantation. We have accounts of swamp-land being sold for rice cultivation as early as the 1730's. These were the plantations that relied on networks of canals to both irrigate and travel around the flooded rice fields.

Clearing the swamplands for rice produced huge amounts of lumber - a lot in the form of sizeable cypress trees. These were used to carve the massive "chine-girder" barges that were common to the rice culture. These barges used sides that were carved from a single cypress log. I have seen them 8 inches thick, 3 feet deep - by 40 feet long! A big cypress tree would be split down the middle, hollow carved and pine planks put between the two sides. The finished barge was usually about 14 feet wide. These are among the most massively made craft in local waters. One was found in the Black River by sports divers Ed Dingle and Gene Baker - they found another one in Mingo Creek. Hamp Shuping has found one in the Waccamaw River and there's yet another one in the Cooper River near Middleburg Plantation. Stuart Pabst is storing one that was found semi-afloat in the Waccamaw that is unique - it is 3 feet wide by about 27 feet long - a floating pencil that may have been used in rice field quarter ditches.

An interesting question about these boats is - who made them? Similar boats in Europe were made 400 years before the colonization of America. Africans imported here as slaves did come from a culture familiar with living on the water and building riverine craft - and of course Native Americans were already hollowing out cypress logs for canoes. Probably all three ethnic influences were involved in the making of these neat craft. There is a good account of how they were made and launched on page 45 of David Doar's 1936 rice planting book available at the Charleston Museum.

A lot of barges were made with planks as well. Just as with the chine-girder barges, we see all kinds of variations in the way these barges were built and fastened together. This again makes an interesting area of study since we can tell a lot about the purpose of the barge, the craftsmanship and ability of the builder and the age of the barge from features such as the thickness of the planks to the type of nails that are used.

Plank barges were used for ferries, plantation craft, phosphate carriers and even granite scows for building the Charleston jetties. The earliest plank barge I have documented dates to about 1860 and is at Friendfield Plantation on the Waccamaw. The latest one studied is a barge used by Santee Cooper to repair eroding dikes on the Cooper River in the 1940's. There are earlier ones out there but I haven't recorded them yet.

If you would like to try your hand at recording barges I will send you a brochure giving step by step instructions.

The basic chine-girder barge is made of few pieces - two chine-logs, bottom planks, inner stringers or keelsons and "header" logs at each end. Plank built barges are more complicated, using side planks supported by interior battens and a "chine keelson,"